

‘TWO MINOR DEMONSTRATIONS’: THE 1/1ST CAMBRIDGESHIRE’S RAIDS ON THE ANCRE, 16-17 SEPTEMBER 1916

SYNOPSIS

Trench raiding was an integral but controversial tactic in warfare on the Western Front during the Great War. This article examines the experiences of the 1/1st Battalion of the Cambridgeshire Regiment in 1916, focusing on two raids carried out simultaneously on one night just to the north of the River Ancre at a time when most British resources were concentrated further south on the Somme. Occurring between two major actions on this section of the front, they were part of a wider policy that sought British domination of no man’s land. The raids, however, were calamitous and resulted in the deaths of four officers, ensuring that, as far as officers of the battalion were concerned, small actions were as potentially fatal as full-scale battles on the Western Front during 1916.

Trench Warfare and Trench Raiding

The huge casualty figures resulting from such major battles as Loos (1915), the Somme (1916) and Passchendaele (1917) still attract attention today, but the persistent number of killed, wounded and missing during the long intervening periods of static trench warfare on the Western front also have the capacity to surprise. The daily casualty lists of battalions in the line fluctuated. Although normally quite small, there were occasions when a sustained artillery blitz or a lucky hit could cause significant casualties in an instant. Thus by the end of a tour of duty the cumulative effect of small but regular losses could place strain on morale and raise doubts about competence. For instance, the young subaltern Anthony Eden, of 21st King’s Royal Rifle Corps, wrote of the inevitable trickle of casualties in the trenches: ‘I loathed each one of them. For more than six months now we had worked hard and trained together in our small group, No. 9 Platoon. I had grown to know my riflemen and liked them immensely. I tried to put out of my mind the inevitable and bloody side of our business, perhaps with the result that I felt each casualty the more’.⁽¹⁾ In the 1/1st Cambridgeshire Battalion another young subaltern wrote of trench life: ‘I find it a very strange feeling, living always as it might be in the presence of death; . . . there is always a leakage, both of officers and men, and the strain in the trenches is continuous. It is sometimes a little overpowering to think that a small mistake on your part may mean several lives lost’.⁽²⁾

Shellfire, rifle grenades and snipers’ bullets caused most of the casualties in trench warfare, but some were the result of activities across no man’s land and up to (and sometimes beyond) the enemy’s front line. These hostile activities varied in size and purpose and first became frequent occurrences during the winter of 1915-16. Most common were very small nightly patrols of one officer or NCO and a couple of other men, whose task was to lie out in no man’s land close to the German wire listening for sounds of enemy movement and activity and seeking weak points in the enemy’s defences. One Yorkshire infantryman of the 4th/5th Black Watch thought these operations were ‘much like the playing at Indians of our boyhood’.⁽³⁾ More dangerous were stronger patrols, sometimes called ‘demonstrations’, which sought briefly to enter the German front line in search of tactical intelligence and the capture

⁽¹⁾ Eden, A: *Another World 1897-1917* (Allen Lane, 1976), pp.77-78.

⁽²⁾ Adam, A. M: *Arthur Innes Adam* (Bowes and Bowes, 1920, reprinted BiblioLife, 2009), p.164.

⁽³⁾ Andrews, W. L: *Haunting Years: The Commentaries of a War Territorial* (Hutchinson, 1930, reprinted 2001), p.107.

of a prisoner. These would comprise at least one officer and from a dozen to twenty men. Casualties were frequent from these incursions. Finally, there were large, artillery-supported raids, with two or three officers leading from eighty to one hundred men into a mini-battle. With the soldiers blackening their faces and festooned with an assortment of diabolical weapons—nailed wooden clubs and medieval-style metal maces as well as bombs and knives—these larger raids might be compared with the ‘cutting-out’ operations favoured by crews of frigates during the era of Nelson.

The higher military authorities justified trench raiding in a number of ways. Some, such as the influence of raids on raising British and diminishing German morale, remain controversial. Other rationales are more persuasive. Knowing which enemy units were in the opposite trench, how they had organised their defensive positions and knowledge of their strength and movements could be valuable intelligence, both at battalion and divisional levels. One of the most persuasive arguments in favour of patrols and raids, however, was the need for subalterns to gain experience of no man’s land under conditions that tested their leadership qualities and their nerve.⁽⁴⁾ Others might have disagreed, but for Anthony Eden, ‘our activities in no-man’s-land became a war within a war and, for me at least, the more meaningful part of it’, while Charles Carrington, moving beyond his company’s wire at night with revolver loaded and cocked, was ‘utterly happy to find that I could do this thing and was not afraid’.⁽⁵⁾ Gaining experience in this manner, however, was fraught with danger, even though it can be argued that there was no alternative strategy available.

The 1/1st Cambridgeshires and No Man’s Land

The 1/1st Battalion the Cambridgeshire Regiment was a territorial force that was mobilised in August 1914 and first went to France, as part of 82nd Brigade, 27th Division, in February 1915. It soon saw action, at Second Ypres. In February 1916, after a few months as a training battalion for 3rd Army School, it joined 118th Brigade, 39th Division. This was primarily a New Army division, but supplemented by the all-Territorial 118th Brigade (the three other battalions were 1/6th Cheshires, the 1/1st Hertfordshires and the 4th/5th Black Watch). The battalion spent most of its time in the Givenchy-Festubert region but in August 1916 the division moved south into the line near Hamel, spanning the River Ancre and overlooked by the notorious Schwaben Redoubt and the machine gun garrison of Thiepval. The Cambridgeshires, alternating with the 4th/5th Black Watch, held the right flank north of the Ancre, which included the marshy ground along the left bank of the river.

In June at Givenchy Lieutenant-Colonel Edward Pius Arthur Riddell had taken command of the battalion, which at the time was regarded with suspicion (it had been ‘thoroughly “strafed”’ at an inspection by a new Brigadier in April and its use as a training battalion suggests that official confidence in its fighting capacity was low).⁽⁶⁾ A Boer War veteran who had transferred to the Rifle Brigade, Riddell was determined to improve his battalion’s reputation. Acting as ‘a new broom’ while the battalion was still holding the line around Givenchy and Festubert, he sought to forge self-

⁽⁴⁾ Holmes, R: *Tommy: The British Soldier on the Western Front 1914-1918* (Harper Perennial, 2005), pp.311-14; Griffith, P: *Battle Tactics of the Western Front* (Yale University Press, 1994), pp.61-62.

⁽⁵⁾ Eden, op.cit.: p. 77; Carrington, C: *Soldiers from the War Returning* (Hutchinson, 1965, reprinted Pen & Sword Books, 2006), p.95.

⁽⁶⁾ Riddell, Brigadier-General E. and Clayton, Colonel M. C: *The Cambridgeshires 1914 to 1919* (Bowes and Bowes, 1934), p. 32; Adam, op.cit.: p.213.

respect in the battalion by remodelling the billets, latrines and cook-houses and establishing plunge-baths for his men out of wagon tarpaulins. The War Diary shows that throughout the summer, working parties permitting, he put the battalion through an intensive programme of training for the coming offensive. As a result of his efforts, Riddell later claimed, 'The whole spirit, military knowledge, and bodily and mental condition of all ranks grew and prospered'. By the time the battalion marched to the Ancre he was 'watching their improvement as a trainer watches a much prized racehorse'.⁽⁷⁾

Riddell was a thorough, meticulous planner, anxious to obtain intelligence on every part of the terrain beyond the frontline, both at Givenchy and on the Ancre. On the evening of 2 July he brought all his officers together to give a short address on the 'value of detail, and on the attack'.⁽⁸⁾ Detail included local tactical intelligence and Riddell, supported by divisional orders to create sustained pressure to prevent the Germans from transferring units to the south, encouraged nightly patrols and raids. There had been incursions into no man's land before Riddell's arrival, as when Second Lieutenant Harold Vaughan, a South African with war experience in South-West Africa, had taken to spending daylight hours in no man's land reconnoitring the German wire (he was shot dead attempting to repeat the manoeuvre), but the prevalence of patrols and raids greatly increased under the new commanding officer. Hardly a night went by when the battalion was in the line without at least one patrol, some under the command of an NCO but most with subalterns leading. They reported on such matters as the numbers holding the enemy frontline, the ease of movement over the terrain and the state of the German wire. Casualties were few but quite regular: the bombing and scouting officer Lieutenant R H Carrette was wounded on 3 July, one Other Rank on the night of 15-16 July and another on the night of 17-18th. During the next night Temporary Captain R J Tebbutt, of 'A' Company, was shot in the back while on patrol (one of three brothers in the regiment, he was the only one to survive the war).⁽⁹⁾

These patrols were preliminary to major raids along the whole X Corps front on 19 July. Artillery barrages preceded these attacks and smoke bombs were used on the Cambridgeshire's front. The battalion's objective was to enter the German frontline just to the north of La Bassée Canal. The raiding party comprised 120 men and five officers. The German wire was found to be uncut and 'a very formidable obstacle', but a few officers and men managed to get through and throw bombs into a trench full of 'demoralized Boches firing straight up into the air'. Forced to withdraw (with some men returning safely only the following afternoon), casualties among the officers were high. Second Lieutenant Arthur Looker managed to walk back to his lines, though suffering from wounds in his hands, his stomach and his foot, to receive a DSO for keeping the enemy at bay while the wounded were withdrawn. Like Vaughan a South African, he survived his wounds, but subsequently was posted to the 3rd King's African Rifles. He was to die, aged only forty-five, in Melbourne, Australia in 1926.⁽¹⁰⁾

Two other officers died in the raid. Lieutenant George Herman, a product of Winchester and Trinity College, Cambridge and 2i.c. 'A' Company, was reported

⁽⁷⁾ Riddell & Clayton, op.cit.: pp.36, 39.

⁽⁸⁾ War Diary, 1/1st Cambridgeshire Battalion, TNA, WO 95/2590, 2 July 1916.

⁽⁹⁾ *Officers Died in the Great War 1914-19* (London 1919), p.244.

⁽¹⁰⁾ [Melbourne] *The Argus*, 8 April 1926.

missing and his body never found, despite the efforts of a search patrol from the 1/6th Cheshires. Yet another South African, Second Lieutenant Guy Rawlinson, who had been commissioned in the Cambridgeshire Regiment in 1915 after service with the Natal Carbineers, was captured but died of his wounds on 23 July. Riddell informed his parents, who had thirteen other children, that Rawlinson 'was last seen alive in the German trenches, fighting like the brave man we all knew him to be'.⁽¹¹⁾ Officer casualties in this operation, which appear to have been disproportionate (only one Other Rank was killed and six wounded), were compounded by the sniping of two subalterns on 20 July, one of whom died.

Immediately on arrival at the Ancre frontline on 26 August, Riddell ordered three night patrols to begin the process of gaining familiarity with the new conditions. Every night for the next week patrols were out, often in very bad weather, as it was known that a major attack was planned for 3 September. They reported on shell damage to the enemy's wire and also made gaps in the British wire preparatory to the battle. This was for the benefit of the 4th/5th Black Watch, which had been deputed to carry out the attack on 3 September on this part of the front. The Cambridgeshires were to be in support.

The objectives of the 39th Division on 3 September were to take three lines of German trenches on a spur south of Beaumont Hamel and then advance up the valley of the Ancre, protecting the left flank of 49th Division advancing on the other side of the river.⁽¹²⁾ The 118th Brigade's attack began well, but failure south of the river led to the attackers being enfiladed from the Schwaben Redoubt and its environs, with the result that the 4th/5th Black Watch fell back to their original line. At one point the threat of a gap appeared in the British line as a German counter-attack developed. On his own initiative, Riddell ordered up his battalion to fill the gap and successfully stopped the enemy attack. No progress was thus made on the day, but Riddell found the men 'elated at the success of their efforts . . . ; laughing, smoking, eating, and talking about the prospects of getting tea sent up to them'.⁽¹³⁾ Casualties were one officer killed and four wounded and fourteen Other Ranks killed or died of wounds and forty-seven wounded.⁽¹⁴⁾

The Raids on 16/17 September 1916

When the British bombardment began in the early hours of 3 September Riddell had heard one of his young officers excitedly shout at him: 'Nothing on earth can withstand that. Will this mean the end of the war?'.⁽¹⁵⁾ This optimist was the twenty-two year old Captain Arthur Innes Adam, late of Winchester and Balliol College, Oxford. Adam, brother of the subsequently celebrated sociologist Baroness Wootton, had joined the battalion in June 1915 and had had a swift baptism of fire. On his first day in the trenches two officers were mortally wounded, one, Lieutenant Hugh Crookham, having arrived with him, and on 2 July he was himself slightly wounded in the hand by a sniper. Like Rudyard Kipling's son John, Adam was extremely short sighted and had only passed the army medical after finding a sympathetic doctor who

⁽¹¹⁾ *De Ruvigny's Roll of Honour 1914-18* (Naval and Military Press, n.d.), Vol. IV, p.165.

⁽¹²⁾ Miles, Captain W: *History of the Great War: Military Operations France and Belgium* (1938, reprinted Imperial War Museum, n.d.), Vol. 2, p.279.

⁽¹³⁾ Riddell and Clayton, op.cit.: p.47.

⁽¹⁴⁾ War Diary and Commonwealth War Graves Commission data.

⁽¹⁵⁾ Riddell and Clayton, op.cit.: p.44.

allowed him to take the eye test while wearing his spectacles. He had been a child prodigy, reading the biblical Job and Jeremiah at the tender age of three. Like so many of his fellow subalterns, with his love of music and the Classics, his high-pitched voice and very fair hair—at Balliol he was nicknamed ‘The Mouse’ and among the soldiers of his Company he was ‘Parson Snowy’—he was an unlikely warrior in an age of industrialised carnage.⁽¹⁶⁾ He often confessed to his mother, a widow and academic, that he had little prowess as an officer and that the cause of his enlistment had been ‘a desire to become a little less irresolute’.⁽¹⁷⁾ Riddell, however, had seen beyond this diffidence in Adam to confirm his position as commander of ‘A’ Company, which he had been holding in an acting capacity since January 1916.⁽¹⁸⁾

Adam was to play a crucial role in one of the raids on 16-17 September, together with Lieutenant William Shaw, who had replaced Herman as 2i.c. ‘A’ Company. The only son of a widow—he was just a baby when his father, a farmer, died in 1894—Shaw came from no privileged background. His mother, an official Cambridge University lodging-house keeper, was a superior servant, but her position gave Shaw an unusual perspective on students and their lives. Although he left school to become an apprentice organ builder, he had ambitions and talents. In 1914 he matriculated at Fitzwilliam Hall, Cambridge, which enabled him to study for a degree without being a member of a college. He joined the university OTC as a Cadet and on 14 October 1914 was commissioned into the 1/1st Cambridgeshires.⁽¹⁹⁾ He went to France with the battalion in February 1915, fought at Second Ypres and was mentioned in despatches in January 1916.⁽²⁰⁾ By September 1916, therefore, he was an experienced trench officer.

On 12 September the battalion relieved the 4th/5th Black Watch in the Hamel right section of the trenches.⁽²¹⁾ This area included a detached post, a mill on the edge of the Ancre. It was from here between 1.00 am and 3.15 am on the morning of the 13th that a patrol from ‘A’ Company moved up the right bank of the river, pacing out the route and making detailed notes of the terrain and every object they passed: hedges, trees and barbed wire. They eventually came across what the War Diary described as a shanty, from within which they heard a man coughing. Another patrol the next night discovered that the shanty was in fact a brick emplacement (in Riddell’s later words, ‘a strong-point’), close to the German second line, in which three men were working. The alarm was raised, whistles were blown and the Germans emerged from their workplace wearing their equipment. The patrol managed to retire without casualties. But Adam and Shaw were now hatching a plan.

In the meantime, under divisional orders to maintain pressure on the front, Riddell was reluctantly planning a large raid to be carried out by ‘C’ Company under the command of the twenty-three year old Captain Francis Marr. Like Adam, Marr was the son of a Cambridge Don. He had joined the battalion in France in April 1915 and was to survive the war as a Brigade Major with a DSO and MC. He died in 1942 when a U-boat torpedoed the SS *City of Cairo*.

⁽¹⁶⁾ *Balliol College War Memorial Book*, Vol. 1.

⁽¹⁷⁾ Adam, *op.cit.*: p.161.

⁽¹⁸⁾ Obituary, *British Medical Journal*, 15 September 1917.

⁽¹⁹⁾ *London Gazette*, 13 October 1914.

⁽²⁰⁾ National Archives, Medal Index Card.

⁽²¹⁾ 1/1st Cambridgeshire War Diary, 12 September 1916.

Among the officers who were to take part in this raid was Second Lieutenant Henry Blythe King Allpass, known as Rex to his friends and regrettably called Allpress in the regimental history. The son of a clergyman who had revived the ancient but moribund Sir George Monod School in Chigwell, Allpass had obtained a First Class Honours degree in Modern Languages at Exeter College, Oxford, where one of his friends was J. R. R. Tolkien and where he had the misfortune to fail to prevent a depressed student friend shooting himself.⁽²²⁾ In September 1914 he took up the position of Head of Modern Languages at St Bees School in Whitehaven, where he also commanded the Junior OTC. Now acknowledged as one of the 'War Poets' and a Fabian in politics, he was also a comic writer of some talent. He wrote for *The Westminster Review* and *Isis* and, having received a commission in the Essex regiment in February 1916, edited at Halton Camp the magazine *Stars for Subalterns*. In this he published a series of whimsical letters to his mother, portraying himself as a bumbling innocent: mistaking the Adjutant for his Colonel and another Colonel for a railway porter; forgetting to wear his Sam Browne belt in public; and calling his batman by the wrong name for three long months. He gently parodied some of the army's more arcane customs, as when he suggested that his daily role of inspecting the kit of five cooks and his sergeant was 'rather an arid life for a Man with a Moustache'.⁽²³⁾

Like Adam and many other young men, Allpass' view of the war was ambiguous. He wanted it to stop, but not before he had experienced it firsthand: 'A week in the trenches, one charge, the DSO (which is much more dignified than a VC), and a wound in my left arm' was his preference. (One of his two brothers had been killed with the Sherwood Foresters in August 1915 at Gallipoli.) There was little chance of his achieving his aim while in a reserve battalion of the Essex Regiment, so he organised an attachment to the Cambridgeshires, joining the 1/1st in the trenches in mid-July 1916. He was appointed Bombing Officer, was present at the 3 September defence of the line and was recommended for the Military Cross.

The objectives of the raid under Marr, according to the War Diary, were 'to enter the enemy's trenches, kill Germans and obtain identifications', but the chances of catching the Germans by surprise were minimal, for their greatly reinforced barbed wire defences required daily artillery and trench mortar bombardments before action could be contemplated. Facing the 1/1st Battalion, moreover, was the 119th Reserve Infantry Regiment, comprising mainly Württembergers with a high reputation as a fighting unit. Riddell had little confidence in the plan, but gave his approval once it had been reported that the wire had been cut. He was more sanguine about the other, smaller raid that Adam and Shaw had proposed, which would involve a small number of men, led by Shaw, who would either capture or kill the 'garrison' in the shanty (now called 'the Summer House'). The larger raid would begin first and would act as a diversion for the smaller one.

Riddell was right to be pessimistic. During the night of the 16th, no sooner had the British barrage begun and 'C' Company moved out of Roberts Trench than a strong German counter-barrage bombarded no man's land. The troops managed to reach the wire, only to find it uncut. The enemy frontline was also strongly garrisoned, although the War Diary claimed they 'had the wind up'. Marr's men were forced

⁽²²⁾ Garth, J.: 'Tolkien, Exeter College and the Great War', in http://www.johngarth.co.uk/php/tolkien_exeter_great_war.php.

⁽²³⁾ Allpass, H. B. K: *Oxford, St Bees and the Front* (T. Werner Laurie, 1920), pp.1-8.

back to Roberts Trench. Unfortunately, Allpass had somehow managed to get through some of the wire. He was last seen lying badly wounded beyond the reach of the stretcher-bearers. It was hoped that he might have been taken prisoner, but he was never seen again. One Other Rank was also reported missing and eight were wounded.

Just to the south a larger tragedy was unfolding. In addition to Adam and Shaw, two other officers were involved in the raid on the Summer House. In defensive support was Lieutenant Alfred Bradford, the Lewis Gun Officer. Born in 1894, he had attended Bedford Grammar School; his father, a widower, was owner of the imposing University Arms Hotel in Cambridge. Bradford initially enlisted in the Middlesex Regiment, was commissioned in May 1915 and joined the 1/1st in France not long after Adam. Finally, overseeing the operation from the mill was the Adjutant, Captain Sir Guy Butlin. A twenty-three year old Old Harrovian whose father had been President of the Royal College of Surgeons, Butlin had graduated from Trinity College, Cambridge in 1914 and was training to become a barrister when war broke out. He immediately joined the Cambridgeshire Regiment and went to France with the 1/1st in February 1915. Thus, like all the other officers involved in the operation, he was very experienced in trench warfare.

For reasons that remain unknown, Adam went part of the way with Shaw and the eight Other Ranks on the bombing mission, remaining next to a small stream. The attack was a fiasco. The previous nightly patrols had put the Germans on alert and they had set up a machine gun post to cover the Summer House. After an exchange of bombs and rifle fire which, according to the War Diary, left several of the defenders dead, the raiders were forced to withdraw. As they crawled back to the stream, it was discovered that a wounded man had been left behind. Fatally, Adam and Shaw, either separately or together, decided to return to find him. Close to the Summer House both were hit by machine gun fire. In the meantime the rest of the party had returned safely to the mill. There Butlin decided to take his orderly and Bradford back to find the missing officers. They found them lying in a very exposed position. Ordering Bradford back to get help, Butlin remained with the wounded men. A stretcher was brought up and Butlin was in the process of placing the more badly wounded Shaw on it when he too was shot, together with one of the bearers, who managed to crawl away. Butlin then ordered the other stretcher-bearer to get further assistance.

By now dawn was breaking and Riddell, having moved to the mill, denied permission to Bradford to return to the wounded by the route used by the raiding party, but he did allow him and his own orderly, Lance Corporal William Nightingale, to seek a passage to the wounded through the dense rushes near the bank of the river. Sometimes up to their necks in water, they managed to find the right place, but no bodies were visible.⁽²⁴⁾ Both returned safely, although Riddell had to creep out to redirect Nightingale, who had lost direction and was heading towards a German trench. It was surmised that the Germans had taken the wounded into their trenches as prisoners. All three, however, died, Shaw as late as 27 September. The Germans buried them, but Butlin's body, like Allpass', was never recovered. These two are commemorated on the Thiepval Memorial. Adam's remains were later exhumed from

⁽²⁴⁾ *Harrow Memorials of the Great War* (1918), in <http://www.archive.org/details/harrowmemorials04warn>.

a small graveyard and reburied in the Achiet-le-Grand Communal Cemetery Extension. Shaw's body now lies in the Porte-de-Paris Cemetery, Cambrai.

Aftermath

The 1/1st battalion played only a small role in the major offensives of 1916 on the Somme battlefield. This explains why the significant impact of trench warfare on the battalion's officer casualties was atypical. Fifteen battalion officers were killed in 1916, six, including Bradford, during the battalion's one major attack in October during the battle of the Ancre Heights. Altogether, seven were killed in offensives, one in the trenches and no fewer than seven in trench raids. Raiding tactics were still being developed, by trial and error, in 1916 and were to improve as the war wore on, but they always were capable of producing significant casualties. In more ways than one, therefore, they might be seen as offensives 'in miniature' as well as useful training for larger operations.⁽²⁵⁾

In the regimental history Riddell called the Summer House raid 'a deplorable adventure' and regretted Adam's decision to accompany the raiding party. 'As a soldier he was wrong', he wrote, but 'as they were all mere lads', none could be blamed for the consequences.⁽²⁶⁾ It is true that all involved were young, either aged twenty-two or twenty-three, but they were not inexperienced. All but Allpass had been in France for more than a year; Adam was a company commander and Butlin was the battalion's adjutant. These 'two minor demonstrations', as the War Diary called them, occurred for tactical and strategic reasons, not in order to give young subalterns experience of warfare. None was fighting out of a sense of naïve idealism. Misfortune turned into tragedy because of the strong *esprit de corps* that Riddell had infused into the battalion. A wounded man could not be left alone without some attempt to rescue him. From this unwritten rule, everything else followed.

⁽²⁵⁾ Griffith, op.cit.: p.193; Spagnoly, T. and Smith, T: *The Anatomy of a Raid: Australia at Celtic Wood 9th October 1917* (Leo Cooper, 1998).

⁽²⁶⁾ Riddell and Clayton, op.cit.: pp.54-55.